Kim Novak came to San Francisco, and San Francisco was never the same

G. Allen Johnson

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Kim Novak in a scene from “Vertigo.”

Photo: Universal Studios

Ever since she emerged from an ethereal green light and into James Stewart’s gaze late in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1958 masterpiece “Vertigo,” Kim Novak has cast a spell on San Francisco moviegoers.

And San Francisco has cast a spell on her.

"San Francisco has always been my favorite city of all time," **Novak told The Chronicle in 2012**.

Back at ya, Kim.

Novak turned 90 on Monday, Feb. 13, nearly 65 years after her star turn in Alfred Hitchcock’s psychological thriller “Vertigo” premiered at the Stage Door Theater (now the nightclub known as August Hall) at Mason and Geary streets on May 9, 1958.

The year before that, Novak made another San Francisco classic, the musical “Pal Joey,” with co-stars Frank Sinatra and Rita Hayworth. As Sen. Dianne Feinstein once put it, the city was **“her best co-star.”**

Kim Novak in a publicity shot during the filming of “Vertigo” in San Francisco.

Photo: Provided by Marc Huestis

“I’ve had the good fortune to know Kim and work with her several times in the past few years,” Noir City festival director and Turner Classic Movies host Eddie Muller said on Monday. “She’s an amazing, soulful person who is proud and protective of her movie legacy, while at the same time able to transcend it and be entirely her own person.”

More Information

"Vertigo": 1 p.m. Feb. 26; 7 p.m. Feb. 27. $9-$12.50. Smith Rafael Film Center, 1118 Fourth St., San Rafael. **cafilm.org**

Although she mostly retired from the movies in the mid-1960s and hasn’t appeared in a film in more than 30 years, Novak continues to attract new generations of fans. That’s due not only to her two San Francisco films but her classic work opposite William Holden in Joshua Logan’s “Picnic”; with Sinatra in Otto Preminger’s groundbreaking look at drug addiction, “The Man With the Golden Arm”; and opposite her “Vertigo” co-star Stewart in the bewitching “Bell, Book and Candle,” among others.

For decades, Novak has lived on a 200-acre farm in Eagle Point, Ore. Her husband of many years, veterinarian Robert Malloy, died in 2020. She has spent more time as a painter (her work can be seen at **kimnovakartist.com**) than as an actress. As a teenager, she had a scholarship offer from the Art Institute of Chicago, and told The Chronicle that she turned to art later in life in part to cope with depression that was eventually diagnosed as bipolar disorder, for which she takes medication.

But San Francisco has been her happy place ever since she left Hollywood. For awhile, she lived in Big Sur and, during the height of the hippie movement, would travel to Haight-Ashbury and show up at dance clubs in a long, flowing skirt and a bright red wig.

“I was pretty far out there. I blended right in with everyone else,” she **told The Chronicle in 2012.**

Event producer Marc Huestis (left) and host Eddie Muller (right) share the stage with Kim Novak during "A Tribute to living Legend Kim Novak" at the Castro Theat in 2018.

Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova/Special to The Chronicle

And like her dual "Vertigo" characters, Judy Barton and Madeleine Elster, she'd spend time at the Legion of Honor museum, Mission Dolores and Fort Point.

"I feel comfortable in this city," Novak said **in 2018,** when she appeared at a 60th anniversary screening of "Vertigo" at the Castro Theatre. "I like the weather; I like changes. (Like the weather), I can change from block to block, too."

Part of what makes Novak so memorable in "Vertigo" is her embodiment of a character who, like so many who come to San Francisco from somewhere else, is in the process of remaking herself.

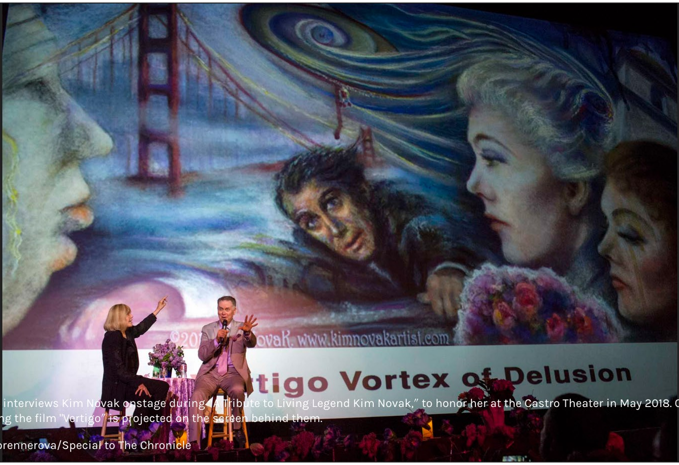
Kim Novak gets direction from Alfred Hitchcock for "Vertigo." James Stewart is in the background.

Photo: S.F. Museum and Historical Society

"Kim has remade herself in her personal life as well over and over again," event planner and promoter Marc Huestis, who organized Novak's appearance in 2018, told The Chronicle on Novak's birthday. "She went from movie star to artist to a farm with horses. She’s had nine lives — and two of them existed in San Francisco in ‘Vertigo.’

“She is a survivor and she is also iconic of the San Francisco spirit.”

Novak has made several trips to San Francisco in recent years. In 2012, during **a star-studded ceremony** at the Old Mint that included former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown and then-Gov. Jerry Brown, she was presented with the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society's Cinematic Icon Award. Nearly four years later, she spent her 83rd birthday at Davies Hall, **where she discussed “Vertigo”** before the San Francisco Symphony played Bernard Hermann’s score for the film to accompany a screening.



Host Eddie Muller interviews Kim Novak onstage during “A Tribute to Living Legend Kim Novak,” to honor her at the Castro Theater in May 2018. One of Novak’s paintings depicting the film "Vertigo" is projected on the screen behind them.

Photo: Jana Asenbrennerova/Special to The Chronicle

Then there was the 2018 event at the Castro, **which drew a sold-out crowd.** She was interviewed onstage by Muller and spent a generous amount of time with her fans. Afterward, she and Muller had a few drinks at the Twin Peaks Tavern.

“She provided one of the best moments of my professional life when she unexpectedly gave me a neck and back massage while we were onstage at the Castro Theatre,” Muller said. “That was something. But then, she’s a completely intuitive and spontaneous person. I adore her.”

And that’s not all. The next morning, the indefatigable Novak invited a group of people, including Huestis and Muller, for Irish coffees and brunch at the Buena Vista Cafe near Ghirardelli Square.

Kim Novak gets ready to enter the water near the Golden Gate Bridge in Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 classic “Vertigo.”

Photo: Paramount Pictures

“She had a couple of Irish coffees and she asked me, ‘Can I kiss you?’ ” Huestis recalled with a laugh. “You don't turn down a kiss from Kim Novak, even if you are a gay man. So she did give me a kiss — and it was pretty passionate — and I called my father after that and I said, ‘Oh, my God, I just got kissed by Kim Novak!’ He was so jealous.”

So here’s to you, Kim Novak, cinema’s quintessential San Francisco woman. The city is raising an Irish coffee to you. Happy birthday!

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